The Radical Lives of

HELEN KELLER

KIM E. NIELSEN

Not only could Keller raise money, but on behalf of the AFB she also was an unparalleled lobbyist. As Migel noted, "Only a heart of stone could fail to respond to an appeal from Helen Keller." Legislators were "spellbound," wept, and reportedly "adjourned temporarily to greet her."[15] In the 1930s and 1940s, she either visited or wrote targeted letters to at least eighteen weepy state legislatures, most often encouraging funding for or creation of state commissions for the blind.[16] Other causes included funding for educational institutions for blind people, bills to allow blind persons to travel with a guide on public transportation for one fare, and funds for Braille books. Sometimes the AFB initiated the visits, sometimes local organizations wrote to the AFB seeking her assistance, sometimes local organizations wrote her directly. In almost every case, the AFB was eventually involved. The numerous letters of thanks she received testify to her effectiveness.[17] She also lobbied, occasionally in person but most frequently via telegram or letter, the U.S. Congress and U.S. presidents.

AFB officials could be quite specific in their requests to Keller. For example, in 1933, Migel urged that she ask Franklin Roosevelt to support a bill allowing blind people to run newsstands in federal office buildings. In 1934, while she was in Scotland on holiday, Migel asked her to cable the New Jersey governor on behalf of legislation allowing blind persons to travel with a guide on public transportation for one fare. He also suggested that she give the governor permission to publicize the cable. Before she and AFB Executive Director Bob Irwin visited the U.S. House Committee, Irwin briefed her on who they were going to visit and likely successful arguments.[18]

Keller and the AFB enthusiastically supported the Social Security Act. When it first passed in 1935, as the Wagner Economic Security Act, she allowed her name to be put on the amendment proposed by Senator Robert Wagner (NY, Democrat) to expand vocational training for blind people. Lobbying on behalf of the measure, she emphasized the amendment's economic as well as human benefits.[19] In 1944, she urged expansion of the Social Security Act to support "the particular needs of the poorer blind." Her testimony before the House Labor Committee highlighted the circum-

stances of "the colored blind" and "the deaf-blind." These were, she said, "the hardest pressed and least cared-for" among her "blind fellows."[20]

Keller apparently complied with the vast majority of these requests, but sometimes she disagreed and refused. For example, when Robert Barnett asked her in 1943 to write to the Senate Finance Committee chair in support of a clause in the tax bill, allowing blind persons to take a flat deduction of $500 to offset expenses incurred because of blindness, she said no. The legislation was not "vitally important," she declared. She noted that she and Barnett were "fairly comfortable," but that the majority of blind people had so little income that they paid no income tax. She sought to "promote the well-being of those caught in the double tragedy of being poor and blind." As a result, instead of a tax deduction, she supported federal insurance against blindness. Barnett's letter of reply acknowledged her arguments and made a half-hearted effort to persuade her otherwise, but it seems clear he did not expect to change her mind.[21]

The immense success of Keller as a fund-raiser and lobbyist reveals the strength and power she held as a public figure. In that role she was unparalleled. Her fame perhaps tells us more about U.S. culture than about her. She was the famous deaf-blind woman—famous for her disability, famous for her cheerful countenance, famous for the innocence presumably ensured her by the lack of sight and hearing, famous for her ability to continue *despite*. One highly publicized day of crass and crabby behavior, or as the AFB feared—un-American politics, would have scratched this pristine public image. She succeeded as a fund-raiser and lobbyist because she reminded others of what they had and did not want to think about losing, namely, sight and hearing. She then artfully asked for assistance—but only for others—while never inducing guilt. The giving, adoring, and revering public responded because she literally embodied an understanding of disability with which it felt comfortable.

Throughout the 1920s, Keller's public life remained integrally tied to the AFB. She served as its major fund-raiser and slowly began to move into political lobbying, in which she would engage more fully in the 1930s and early 1940s. Privately, she tried to write on topics other than her childhood

Portrait of Helen Keller, John Macy, and Anne Sullivan Macy, undated. *Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind. Used with permission of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.*

Politics took up the rest of the time. Keller subscribed to a German socialist periodical printed in Braille, hung a large red flag in her study, routinely read the *International Socialist Review*, and involved herself increasingly in socialist issues. When Fred Warren, editor of the socialist newspaper *Appeal to Reason* was arrested for sending "scurrilous, defamatory and threatening" literature through the mail, she protested his "unrighteous conviction."[27] When the party battled over tactics in 1913, she issued a public call for harmony, scolding members: "Are we to put difference of party tactics before the desperate needs of the workers? . . . Shame on us! The enemy is at our very doors, and the hand of the destroyer does its fell work, while we leave the victims helpless." She supported the faltering socialist paper the New York *Call* with $50 worth of bonds as well as humor, warning the paper that "I hope the whole stock-bond, rent-interest-and-

profit system is out of business before they fall due."[28] She also publicly supported socialist leaders and candidates—IWW strike leader Arturo Giovannitti in 1914, New York mayoral candidate Morris Hillquit in 1917, and the arrested Eugene Debs in 1919. During her travels she sought local political "comrades," telling John Macy that they greeted her "warmly" wherever she went. In 1914, she joined the Los Angeles Local of the Socialist Party.[29]

Poverty and the unequal distribution of resources pained her greatly. Education, literature, travel, social debates, and meeting many different kinds of people wonderfully expanded her world. But she struggled with the incongruities: "the bright world of my imagining" did not live up to the "world of facts—a world of misery and degradation, of blindness, crookedness, and sin, a world struggling against the elements, against the unknown, against itself." Those who labored most harshly, who suffered most profoundly because of labor, then benefited little from that labor. "We cannot," she insisted, "shut our eyes to these glaring evils. . . . I am the determined foe of the capitalist system, which denies the workers the rights of human beings. I consider it fundamentally wrong, radically unjust and cruel."[30]

When workers struck, Keller quickly supported them. Through strike activism she became involved with the radical union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or "Wobblies"). The IWW sought to unite all workers, skilled and unskilled, in the overthrow of capitalism via strikes, direct action, propaganda, and boycotts. During World War I, the Wobblies opposed military service because they considered the war a profit-making venture for already-wealthy industrialists. Inspired by the massive and successful IWW strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, she joined 1912 strike efforts in Little Falls, Massachusetts, by sending a letter of encouragement and $87 to striking workers. John Macy read aloud the message at a strike meeting while strike leader Big Bill Haywood praised her actions. Keller called the cause of the strikers, 70 percent of them female, "my cause. If they are denied a living wage, I also am denied. While they are industrial slaves, I cannot be free."[31]

spread of Americanism during the cold war. She may have been a one-time member of the Socialist Party, but she was also a cold war liberal in support of the spread of Americanism and a woman who found her identity and purpose in international travel.

After leaving Israel in late May 1952, Helen and Polly visited France and Florence Davidson for the first time since Jo's death and joined in the Paris celebrations of the one-hundredth anniversary of Louis Braille's invention of Braille. Nella unsympathetically characterized their midsummer return to the United States as "melancholy . . . partly caused by the letdown from having been treated like princesses when they were abroad," but noted that the heavy schedule of speeches and letters that awaited them had "to a large extent dissipated" their melancholy. Still, she thought them lonely. Nella continued to worry greatly about Polly's health and the lack of an "understudy" in case of Polly's death. As Helen made plans for a South American trip and then a trip to India, Nella complained that "she has no realization that Polly's life may be in danger and [I] must get this unpleasant fact across to her."[28]

Helen clearly did not want to deal with the personal issues of life in the United States. She dove immediately into concerns about Joseph McCarthy and the spreading accusations of communism. She and Robert Duffus, a Westport neighbor and associate editor at the *New York Times*, shared disappointment that President Eisenhower had failed to denounce McCarthy. She praised the *New York Times* August editorial against McCarthy and the paper subsequently published her letter supporting its stand. McCarthy attacked many for reasons far less significant than he could have claimed for Helen, but he did not attack her. Those who looked, including the FBI and the AFB, easily found statements of her progressive political interests that in others would have been highly suspect. The AFB clearly worried about her public political statements. She delighted in having to curb her tongue and in failing to curb her tongue. The admiration of the international and national public ensured her legal safety and public reputation, but it remained grounded in an understanding of her as eternally overcoming inherent deficiencies. This public per-

sona not only kept her from suffering significantly in the witch-hunts of McCarthyism, but also kept her from the public political participation she desired and confined her to issues pertaining to blindness.[29]

Nella Henney understood well Keller's double-edged public persona and tried to shape it. That same fall of 1952, she wrote of Nancy Hamilton's plans for a party celebrating the life and work of Helen Keller (and conveniently timed immediately before the release of Hamilton's 1953 film on Keller, *The Unconquered*, which would ultimately win a 1955 Academy Award[30]). Hamilton hoped to gather a multitude of political and entertainment celebrities, such as Adlai Stevenson, Dwight Eisenhower, Arthur Godfrey, Cardinal Spellman, Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Anderson, and Bernard Baruch. The intention was to gather people "as far apart in station and belief as possible to give visible evidence that Helen Keller brings all sorts and conditions of men together, their differences forgotten." Henney liked the idea but felt "the premise is false. *It is only when Helen speaks of the blind or the deaf that she brings all mankind together. Politically (and she'll have her say politically or bust) she does not*" [italics added]. Keller's disability grounded her fame and public personhood. When she moved beyond claiming disability as her sole identity, her fame and public efficacy weakened. Those who relied on her for fund-raising knew this. As Henney put it, "She keeps the reactionaries among the AFB trustees on tetherhooks. And Mr. Migel. And Westbrook Pegler and his like." Keller had learned this lesson well by the mid-1920s and repeatedly relearned the lesson in painful ways for the rest of her life.[31]

Henney fiercely policed public film, theatrical, and print representations of Keller but approved of Nancy Hamilton's efforts. In 1950, she, Keller, and AFB staff members had met privately with film director Robert Flaherty about doing a Keller film.[32] The AFB and Henney drove this effort, not the seventy-year-old Keller. Henney expressed "outrage" at Flaherty's "betrayal," after he notified the press about the picture and made it known that he planned to approach Katharine Cornell to appear in the film. He was involved no further. Henney held greater control over Hamilton. She and Keller had first met the director in 1939, when introduced by

Klages, Mary. *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

———. "What to Do with Helen Keller Jokes: A Feminist Act." In Regina Barreca, ed., *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy.* Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992: 13–22.

Kleege, Georgina. "Helen Keller and 'The Empire of the Normal.'" *American Quarterly* 52/2 (June 2000): 322–325.

———. "Blindness and Insight." Raritan 22/2 (Fall 2002): 162–179.

———. "Letters to Helen." *Michigan Quarterly Review.* 37/3 (Summer 1998): 371–391.

———. "Blind Rage." *Southwest Review.* 83/1 (1998): 53–61.

———. "The World in Your Hands: An Open Letter to Helen Keller." Unpublished work in process, cited with author's permission.

———. "Helen Keller's Love Life." Unpublished work in process, cited with author's permission.

Kline, Wendy. *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

Koestler, Frances A. *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in America.* New York: David McKay, 1976.

Kraft, Barbara S. *The Peace Ship: Henry Ford's Pacifist Adventure in the First World War.* New York: Macmillan, 1978.

Kudlick, Catherine J. "The Outlook of *The Problem* and the Problem with the *Outlook*: Two Advocacy Journals Reinvent Blind People in Turn-of-the-Century America." In Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives.* New York: New York University Press, 2001: 187–213.

———. "Helen Keller, American Pragmatism, and French Ideas of Acculturation." Paper presented at the Western Society for French History, 2002. In author's possession.

Ladd-Taylor, Molly. "Eugenics, Sterilization and Modern Marriage in the USA: The Strange Career of Paul Popenoe." *Gender & History* 13/2 (August 2001): 298–327.

Lane, Harlan. *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf.* New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

———. *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community.* San Diego: Dawn Sign Press, [1992], 1999.

Lasch, Christopher. *The Social Thought of Jane Addams.* New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.

Lash, Joseph. *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy.* New York: Addison-Wesley, 1980.

Lewis, David Levering. *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963*. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.

Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Loewen, James W. *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*. New York: New Press, 1999.

———. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: New York University Press, 1995.

Longmore, Paul K., and David Goldberger. "The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History." *Journal of American History* 87/3 (December 2000): 888–922.

Longmore, Paul K., and Lauri Umansky. "Disability History: From the Margins to the Mainstream." In Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press, 2001: 1–29.

———. "A Note on Language and the Social Identity of Disabled People." *American Behavioral Scientist* 18/2 (January/February 1985): 419–423.

———. "The Life of Randolph Bourne and the Need for a History of Disabled People." *Reviews in American History* (December 1985): 581–587.

Macy, John. *About Women*. New York: William Morrow, 1930.

———. *Socialism in America*. New York: Doubleday, 1916.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946–1958." *Journal of American History* 79/4 (March 1993): 1455–1482.

Muncy, Robyn. *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Murphy, Grace. *Your Deafness Is Not You: New Design for Deafness*. New York: Harper, 1954.

Nagai, Takashi. *The Bells of Nagasaki*. New York: Kodansha International, 1984 edition.

Neff, Nelson. "Travels with Helen and Polly." Unpublished manuscript in Nelson Neff file, AFB, 1972.

Nielsen, Kim. *Un-American Womanhood: AntiRadicalism, AntiFeminism, and the First Red Scare*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001.

———. "Helen Keller and the Politics of Civic Fitness." In Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press, 2001: 268–290.

Oldfield, Sybil. *Women Against the Iron Fist: Alternatives to Militarism, 1900–1989*. Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

"If you have not read Kim Nielsen's *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, then I highly recommend it. As a person who has labored through numerous thick volumes on the life of this remarkable deaf-blind woman, I am delighted with Nielsen's concise and refreshing scholarly work . . . it captures Keller's political dimension with great detail, based on such additional—and sometimes chilling—sources as military intelligence and FBI files."
—*Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*

"*Radical Lives* fills out an important dimension of our cultural memory of the adult Helen Keller."
—*Ms. Magazine*

"The book's compactness, straightforward writing style, and revolutionary approach make *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* invaluable for both teachers and scholars. Keller would be delighted that Nielsen allowed her her Scotch."
—*Journal of American History*

Several decades after her death in 1968, Helen Keller remains one of the most widely recognized women of the twentieth century. But the fascinating story of her vivid political life—particularly her radicalism and anti-capitalist activism—has been largely overwhelmed by the sentimentalized story of her as a young deaf-blind girl.

Keller had many lives indeed. Best known for her advocacy on behalf of the blind, she was also a member of the Socialist Party, an advocate of women's suffrage, a defender of the radical International Workers of the World, and a supporter of birth control—and she served as one of the nation's most effective but unofficial international ambassadors. In spite of all her political work, though, Keller rarely explored the political dimensions of disability, adopting beliefs that were often seen as conservative, patronizing, and occasionally repugnant.

Using analytic tools and new sources, Nielsen teases out the motivations for and implications of Keller's political and personal revolutions to reveal a more complex and intriguing woman than the Helen Keller we thought we knew.

Kim E. Nielsen is Professor of Social Change & Development, History, and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. She is the editor of *Helen Keller: Selected Writings*, also available from NYU Press.

In the History of Disability series

Cover image: Eleanor Roosevelt and Helen Keller at the February 1, 1955, farewell banquet to Keller before her departure for India, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Japan. Photograph by William Sauro. © Bettmann / CORBIS. Used with permission.

DISABILITY STUDIES / HISTORY

New York University Press
Washington Square
New York, NY 10003
www.nyupress.org

ISBN 978-0-8147-5814-4
90000
9 780814 758144